

Eating Wonderland

RECENT WORK BY SUE JOHNSON



FEBRUARY 8 TO JUNE 15, 2008
LORA ROBINS GALLERY OF DESIGN FROM NATURE
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS

Introduction

We are very pleased to present the work of Maryland artist Sue Johnson at the Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature, University of Richmond Museums. The exhibition premieres recent ceramic work created by Johnson at the Arts/Industry residency program of the John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and funded by Kohler Company, Kohler, Wisconsin. This unique residency provides visiting artists the opportunity to learn techniques and work with materials and equipment in Kohler's pottery, iron, and brass foundries. Johnson's participation resulted in her "Incredible Edibles" series, which consists of ceramic castings of dinnerware and popular foodstuffs that focus on themes of food, consumption, marketing, and mass production.

Her accompanying series of two-dimensional works on paper, "Episodes in a Fantastic Landscape," explores the creation and use of imagery in popular culture, the influence of context on these images, and how simple manipulations can result in humor, possible aversion, and complex commentaries on contemporary society. Finally, her more than sixteen-foot-wide painting on paper "New Stories

from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)," created specifically for this exhibition, merges all of these themes while including specific references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and to current environmental issues.

Organized by the University of Richmond Museums, the exhibition was curated by N. Elizabeth Schlatter, Deputy Director and Curator of Exhibitions, University Museums, with assistance from the artist. The exhibition was made possible in part with funds from the University's Cultural Affairs Committee.

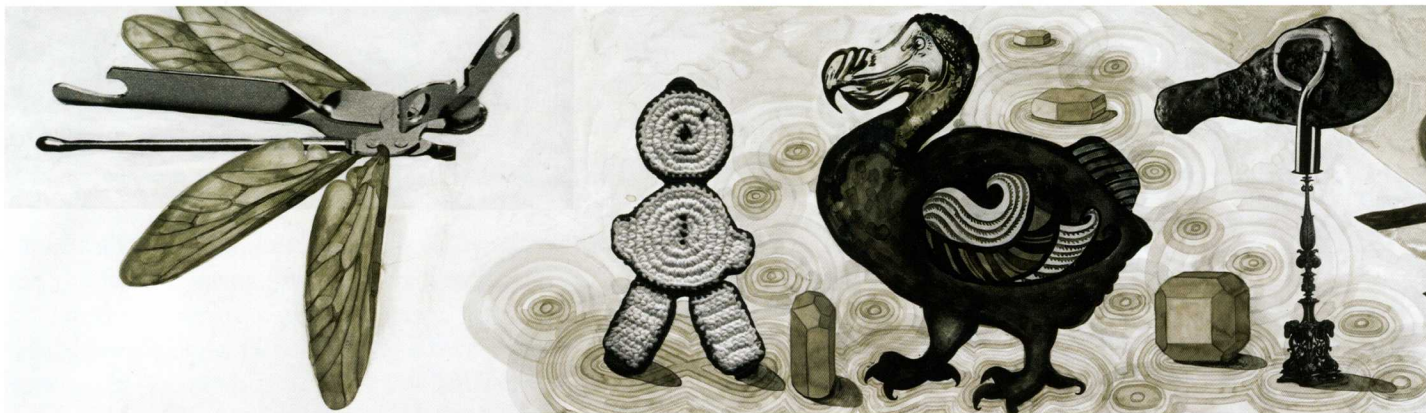
RICHARD WALLER

Executive Director

University of Richmond Museums

Cover: Sculptures from the series *Incredible Edibles*, 2007, slip-cast vitreous china, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist

Below: *New Stories from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)*, 2007, digital ink-jet print with ink and ink wash on paper, 18 x 195 inches, Collection of the artist



Eating Wonderland

With these two words — eating wonderland — Sue Johnson's exhibition title succinctly conveys elemental aspects of her recent art. Many of her two- and three-dimensional works are centered on issues of food and consumption, and they typically involve surreal imagery and subtext while a sense of impending violence or doom lurks within each piece. By considering different interpretations of the phrase "eating wonderland," layers of meaning can be inferred while also recognizing various artistic and cultural influences and connections.

Throughout the work of "The Alternate Encyclopedia" (1995-present), many people have remarked on relationships to the Alice stories and my penchant for anthropomorphizing of all sorts of inanimate objects and zoological creatures. As I have worked on the project, works often suppress the well-known human characters of fairy tales and mythologies and instead elevate the role of the flora and fauna by giving voice and agency to what is commonly perceived as the inanimate in nature (Pegasus, Peter Cottontail, Peapod from the Princess and the Pea, etc.).

— Sue Johnson

Johnson's wonderland refers to the setting of Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a story the author originally fabricated to entertain children of his friends and colleagues. Carroll (whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) based his main character on Alice Liddell, daughter of the dean of Christ Church in Oxford, England, where the author studied and worked as a deacon and a mathematician. After drifting into a dream while relaxing under a tree, Alice follows a white rabbit down a rabbit hole, falling into Wonderland where she encounters outrageous characters, preposterous situations, changing senses of scale, and unpredictable permutations of logic.

Similarities in tone, aesthetics, and content were noticeable between Carroll's style of nonsense writing and Sue Johnson's artwork in her 2004 exhibition "The Alternative Encyclopedia" at the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth. But the Alice books have become more of a focused theme for Johnson since beginning work on a project while she serves as artist-in-residence for the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. This forthcoming project will fuse the work of American poet Marianne Moore and that of Carroll; in both subject areas the Rosenbach holds significant archives including many original drawings by Carroll and drawings and prints by John Tenniel,

